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FAIRS Subject Report

GCC Approves New Standards for Expiration Periods and Food Labeling

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Report Highlights:

The Gulf Cooperation Council has approved new standards governing expiration periods and food labeling. Governments in Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE are expected to adopt these standards in coming months as national standards. The standards address a long standing issue related to shelf life, but continue some requirements that have complicated the export process in the past.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Annual Report
Dubai [TC1]
[TC]

Disclaimer: This summary is based on a *cursory* review of the subject announcement and therefore should not, under any circumstances, be viewed as a definitive reading of the regulation in question, or of its implications for U.S. agricultural export trade interests. In the event of a discrepancy or discrepancies between this summary and the complete regulation or announcement as published in Arabic, the latter shall prevail.

ATO Dubai Summary: Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have approved two new standards that will replace existing standards for the labeling and expiration periods of food products. The Government of Saudi Arabia prepared Gulf Standard/2005 (currently unnumbered) which has been approved by the GCC Standards Committee and is expected to replace previous GCC shelf life standards GS 150/1993 and GS 1023/2000. The Government of Qatar prepared GS 9/2005 which has also been approved by the GCC Standards Committee and is expected to replace the previous labeling standard GS 9/1995. GCC standards should be adopted as national standards before they are enforced by individual member countries. Officials from the GCC countries covered by ATO Dubai (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, aka the GCC-5)) indicate that minor adjustments are needed before the new standards are final and ready for adoption as national standards. The GCC is taking steps to harmonize its food standards to facilitate the flow of goods between member countries.

For the most part, the new standards appear to try and incorporate international guidelines and address some longstanding issues, particularly in relation to expiration periods. However, some requirements that have complicated the export process previously remain. Bahrain and Oman are concerned about the consistency of some of the provisions of the new standards with international guidelines in light of their free trade agreements with the United States. Bahrain in particular is seeking guidance from the United States before adopting the new standards as national standards.

Regulatory experts who are familiar with Codex guidelines may wish to review these new standards for consistency with international standards. However, the GCC considers these standards to be final except for some final minor adjustments. Similarly, companies that export to the GCC may wish to review these new requirements. It will likely be at least a few months before GCC-5 members adopt these standards as national standards, a process that should include a six month phase-in period. Reportedly, Saudi Arabia has already implemented the standard for expiration periods which was originally prepared as a local Saudi Arabian standard. ATO Dubai can provide copies of the two standards upon request.

ATO Dubai Analysis:

1. Gulf Standard/2005 (unnumbered) -- Expiration Periods of Food Products Expected to replace GS 150/1993 and GS 1023/2000

- This standard establishes mandatory expiration periods for 22 perishable products or product categories such as chilled meats, chilled offal, fresh dairy products, baby foods, fruit juices and table eggs. Additional requirements relating to temperature and packaging are also specified.
- Voluntary expiration periods are established for a range of frozen and processed products including meat and dairy products, bakery products, processed fruits and vegetables, certain condiments and drinks. Manufacturers have the option of using the actual expiry period in lieu of the voluntary expiration periods established in the standard.

- The standard eliminates the long standing GCC requirement that half of a product's shelf-life remain at the time of importation, a change that should simplify the export process significantly, especially for consolidators who supply mixed containers with a variety of food products.
- The standard exempts a number of products from expiration periods including salt, white sugar, dried legumes, dried vegetables, spices and certain condiments, tea, rice, vinegar and fresh fruits and vegetables including potatoes that have not been peeled or cut.
- While this standard deals principally with expiration periods, it also clearly continues the requirement for labeling products with a production date. This would continue to longstanding GCC practice of requiring that products include both production and expiration dates.

Important Dates:

1. **Proposed Implementation Date:** To be determined, likely within the next six months, but will probably vary slightly by country.
2. **Validity Period:** Indefinite from the date adoption
3. **Comments:** Have been submitted previously. GCC officials consider these documents to be final, but if exporters or regulators have concerns they should inform ATO Dubai or USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service at IRSD@fas.usda.gov.

**2. Gulf Standard GS 9/2005 – Labeling of Pre-Packaged Foodstuffs
Expected to replace GS 9/1995**

- Consistent with Standard/2005, this standard also requires the labeling of products with both production and expiration dates. The earlier draft version of the standard would have made the practice of double dating optional, but was subsequently modified.
- The standard continues the requirement for Arabic labeling. This requirement is currently enforced in Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain. The UAE has not always enforced this requirement and many food products are available in the UAE without Arabic labels. The UAE Cabinet of Ministers issued a consumer protection law in March of 2007 which requires an Arabic label on consumer products. While some officials have opined that the consumer protection law targets non-food products, the new domestic law coupled with the planned adoption of GS 9/2005 could prompt UAE officials to more strictly enforce the Arabic labeling requirement. While stickers are acceptable, a number of exporters could have to begin including Arabic labels for their exports to the UAE. Exporters should coordinate closely with their importers to stay abreast of developments related to this issue.
- The standard adopts language that is similar to the Codex Alimentarius for the labeling of products obtained through biotechnology of an allergen.

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